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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of interpersonal cognitive problem solving (ICPS) training for inner city mothers on the problem-solving skills and behaviors of their children. Twenty black mother-child pairs received training and 20 pairs matched in ICPS ability served as controls. The children were of comparable mean age (4.3 years), school behavioral adjustment and sex distribution (10 boys and 10 girls per group). All children attended federally funded day care. The training involved ICPS training for the mothers themselves and a sequenced set of 20-minute lessons that the mothers administered to their children daily for 3 months. Results showed that relative to controls, trained mothers improved in ICPS ability and mother-trained children improved in both ICPS ability and in school behaviors. It was concluded that ICPS ability functions as a significant behavioral mediator and that mothers' improved thinking and childrearing style skills contributed significantly to their children's development of that ability. (JMB)

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Interpersonal Problem Solving Intervention For Mother and Child*

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Four-year-old James asked his friend John to give him back his truck. John said "No, I'm still playing with it." He had been playing with it a long time, and James, angry and frustrated tried to grab it.

Did James try to grab the truck as a reaction to frustration or did he think about how that could be one way to get it back? Could he also think of other ways? Did he think of potential consequences of grabbing and if so, would he have chosen a different option (if he could think of one)?

We have found consistently that impulsive and especially inhibited "inner city" preschool and kindergarten youngsters are relatively deficient in both alternative solution and consequential thinking skills when compared to children not displaying such behaviors (see references 4, 5, 9, 11). Impulsive youngsters may lash out for feelings of frustration. In the case of inhibited youngsters, it is possible they have experienced failure so often they just need to withdraw from people and from problems they cannot solve. In any case, it is clear that neither impulsive nor inhibited children know, or at least think about what to

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do to the same extent as do their better adjusted classmates.

Whether availability of interpersonal cognitive problem solving (ICPS) skills is an antecedent condition of adjustment cannot be ascertained from correlational studies alone. We developed a theoretically based intervention program for four- and five-year-olds to test the position that these ICPS skills mediate social adjustment. Training teachers to use the program, we have found that impulsive and inhibited children who most improved in the trained thinking skills were the same youngsters who most improved in social adjustment--not by direct modification of the behavior itself, but by altering the child's interpersonal problem solving style of thinking (see references 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11).

We then turned our attention to the home, and found that "inner city" mothers could also be effective ICPS-agents to their preschool children, and importantly, that behavior improved in <u>school</u> (as rated by a new set of teachers unaware of the training, its procedures or its goals). We believe this occurred because children were taught how to think, not what to think, so that when new problems would arise, the child could think them through and solve them (see references 4, 5, 8, 10, 11).

This new study investigates: 1) whether a mother's own problem solving skills can be enhanced; 2) whether her ability to guide her child to solve <u>real</u> problems (a measure we call "childrearing style") could be enhanced; and 3) how (and if change in mothers problem-solving skills and childrearing style affects her child's problem-solving skills and/or behavior.

We learned that before training, many mothers interviewed were

just as preoccupied with their needs as their child was with his. James mother, for example, handled the grabbing problem this way:

M: Why did you snatch that truck from John?

C: Cause it's mine.

M: Why don't you play with your cars?

C: I want my truck back.

M: You should either play together or take turns. Grabbing is not nice.

C: But I want my truck now.

M: Children must learn to share. John will get mad and he won't be your friend.

C: But mom, he won't give it to me.

M: You can't go around grabbing things. Would you like it if he did that to you?

C: No.

M: Tell him you're sorry.

While this mother did talk to her child, nothing was communicated that would teach her child how to think. Preoccupied with "teaching" her child to share, she did the thinking for him. When she asked James why he snatched the truck from John, she might have taken what he said to find out more about the problem. But she probably would have told him to give it back no matter how James answered her question. She was thinking about what was important to her, not what was important to him. If parents complain their child doesn't listen to them, how often does the child feel no one listens to them?

For mothers, the goals were: 1) to increase sensitivity that the child's point of view may differ from her own; 2) that there is more than one way to solve a problem; 3) that thinking about what is happening is, in the long run, more beneficial than immediate action to stop it; and 4) to provide a model of problem solving thinking--a thinking parent might inspire a child to think.

For the child, the cognitive goal was to teach a set of skills that would enhance his or her ability to conceptualize alternative solutions and consequences relevant to interpersonal problems.

Previous groups of teachers and mothers were taught how to administer the formal program script to children. They were also taught how to guide, then allow the child to think when real problems come up. For the first time, the specific effect of the latter on the child's thinking and behavior was measured. Also, for the first time, mothers received training in problem solving thinking skills of their own. As the mother helps her child think about his own and other's feelings and how to consider the effects of his actions upon others, she also thinks about feelings and how what she does affects others (including her child). As a mother guides her child to think of alternative solutions to problems relevant to him, she also thinks of solutions to problems relevant to her (particularly when a child creates a problem involving her, such as "Mike won't do what I ask him to, lately). Just as the child is never told solutions to problems or consequences to acts, neither are the mothers. The value is not on what they think, but that they think.

The sequenced set of daily 20-minute lessons the mother administers to her child (see chart) takes about three

months. The concepts are the same as those taught to children by teachers, and the script, when necessary was readapted for use with a single child at home.

Twenty black mother-child pairs received training. Twenty pairs matched in ICPS ability served as controls. The children were also comparable in mean age (4.3), school behavioral adjustment and sex distribution (10 boys, 10 girls, per group). All children attended federally funded day-care.

Relative to controls, mother-trained children improved in ICPS ability ($p<.001$) and in school behaviors ($p<.05$), findings replicating previous research. In this new study, trained mothers also improved in ICPS ability, relative to their controls ($p<.001$).

Given that mother's thinking skills can be altered by ICPS-training, the question now is how (and if) such change effects their child's ICPS thinking and/or behavior.

Mother's improved ability to solve hypothetical adult problems (such as how to keep a friend from being angry after showing up too late to go to a movie) did not relate to her child's improved ICPS skills, but her ability to solve hypothetical problems about children (or about children and their parents) did. Also having significant effect on the child's ICPS skills was the mother's increased ability to guide her child to solve his own problems ($p<.01$), and mothers who could best do this also improved most in ability to solve hypothetical child-child or mother-child type problems ($p<.01$). These relationships suggest that increasing mother's ability to think about these kinds of problems is intimately related to how she guides her child to solve

real problems that arise, and together, both have significant impact on the child's ICPS skills.

Here is how a mother handled a problem similar to that of James', after training. Ralph grabbed a racing car from his friend.

M: What happened? What's the matter?

C: He's got my racing car. He won't give it back.

M: Why do you have to have it back now?

C: 'Cause he's had a long turn.

In eliciting the child's point of view, this mother just learned something that would not have been possible had she simply demanded he share. She learned that in fact, her son had shared his toy. The nature of the problem now appeared different.

M: How do you think your friend feels when you grab toys?

C: Mad, but I don't care. It's mine.

M: What did your friend do when you grabbed the toy?

C: He hit me but I want my toy.

M: How did that make you feel?

C: Mad.

M: You're mad and your friend is mad, and he hit you. Can you think of a different way to get your toy back so you both won't be mad and so he won't hit you?

What Ralph would say at this point is not the critical issue. What is critical is that in such dialoguing Ralph is guided to think about the problem, and what happened when he acted as he did.

This mother focused on the child's view of the problem--wanting his toy back--and not what might have been her view--discomfort with his act of grabbing.

While mothers' improved skills and childrearing style affected change in the child's ICPS skills, covariance analyses showed it was change in the child's ICPS skills which had the most significant direct impact on behavior ($p<.001$). Also, trained youngsters judged to be impulsive or inhibited (pre) and adjusted (post) improved in the trained thinking skills significantly more than those who remained aberrant, especially in alternative solution thinking. This linkage also replicates teacher-training research, supporting the notion that ICPS ability functions as a significant behavioral mediator. The findings also suggest that mothers' improved thinking and childrearing style skills contributed significantly to their child's development of that ability.

Finally, the present group of mother-trained youngsters increased in ICPS skills significantly more than a previous group trained by mothers not receiving systematic ICPS-training of their own (see references 4,5,8). While both of these mother-trained groups of youngsters improved more than controls, these findings suggest that greater impact on the child occurs when the mother as well as the child are taught how to think. The mediating effects of a child's ICPS skills on his behavior have clear implications for optimal mental health programming for mothers and their young children. It seems especially possible that such programming might particularly benefit another group of mothers, mothers who abuse their child because they feel insufferable childrearing pressures, and do not, or cannot think of what else

to do.

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